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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Interviewers

Interviewee

(signature)

Ada Orskov
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Plainfield, Ill.
(city & state)

(date)

Feb. 27, 1974
(date)

JJC
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INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Ada Orbesen

INTERVIEWER: Robert Sterling

STERLING: This is an interview with Mrs. Ada Orbesen at her home at 716 Eastern Avenue in Plainfield, Illinois, February 27, 1974. Why don't we begin with where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.

ORBESEN: Well, I was born alongside this old Illinois and Michigan canal a good many years ago; I won't say how many. (Laughter) We lived right beside it, practically on the bank, about ninety feet back on this old Illinois and Michigan canal. My father was a Deputy County Clerk, name is Knowlton; and he worked in Joliet. But he wanted to raise his children out in the country, and he loved it out there too. So he bought this place; we had about seven acres on one side of the canal. And then he later bought a farm on the other side of the canal, so we had two sets of buildings. And this old canal afforded us a great deal of pleasure. Nobody could have had a finer childhood than we five children had because this canal afforded us endless amount of pleasure and exploration. And the first boat that we had, I must have been about six or seven years old, and it was an old scow, big old heavy scow that came floating down. It was a derelict; nobody owned it. My brothers fished it out and brought it to the bank, and I thought it was just delightful. We all had a love for boats and water right in our blood. I learned to row that old scow around; it was as heavy as lead, but it was a great deal of pleasure. Then later we had a canoe, and we had rafts. We learned to swim in the canal. It was full of turtles, mud turtles; they

used to sit along on a log, a whole line of mud turtles sitting on a log to sun themselves. It was fun to throw a rock in and splash right beside them and see them all dive in at once. There were also snapping turtles, but we didn't have much to do with them because they could bite. And then the crawdaddies, do you know what a crawdaddie is? It is a small crab, and it has pinchers. You want to watch out for them and not wade where you see any of them. Now the canoe gave us a lot of pleasure. My brother was an excellent canoeist. And we used to spend a lot of time in that canoe. One day the wind was just right, came from the south; and it blew very strong. And he rigged up a sail on this canoe, and he and I went sailing upstream -- had to go up, the canal wasn't very wide. You couldn't tack or come back; you had to just keep going. And it was so much fun, we kept on for two or three miles. (Laughter) And then of course, we had to take the sail down and paddle back, and that wasn't so much fun. So we didn't do that again. But one time we had the nicest day. We planned to spend the whole day in this canoe. We took our food along with us and we went up the canal two or three miles to where there had been an old feeder. Now that is a stream that connected with the river; the Dupage river was not far from the canal at that point. And this was the feeder which had been used before to transfer water from either the canal to the river or vice versa. So we planned to go upstream to where this feeder was and then go down the river. And there were some rapids, too -- not very deep rapids -- but they were shallow so that if you had stayed in the canoe you would bump the bottom. So we both got out, of course we were barefoot, and I waded alongside and he waded and piloted the canoe down over the rapids. That was lots of

fun. Then on we went, clear on down to the Channahon Lock where this river, the Dupage river, crossed the canal at the Channahon Lock. Then we pulled our canoe up the bank to the canal and paddled back home north on the canal. That was a day to remember.

STERLING: You say that they did a lot of swimming in the canal. When did the water change so that you couldn't swim in it anymore?

ORBESEN: Well, we learned to swim in this old canal because the water was clean and pure enough when we first moved there; and we could even catch fish there, small fish, and eat them. But later it got polluted by the mills at Rockdale. They sent the pollutant material down. And then we couldn't swim in it anymore. But, we went over to the river; the Dupage river was only about a quarter of a mile to the west. We swam in that.

STERLING: The canal crossed the Dupage at Channahon by lock number six?

ORBESEN: Between the two locks there was a dam there, which held the water back in the river. And then the river water went out across the bank; and it went on to the left of the canal, where before, it had been on the right-hand side. This is going downstream. And that was supposed to be quite a feat of engineering. Even today when you read about it, the engineers say that was a great feat to do in those days.

STERLING: So those coming down the canal would pass through the Channahon Locks?

ORBESEN: Two locks. They had two locks up at Channahon. That was the upper lock. And then the boat would be lowered down to where this river

crossed the canal, and then it would go through the lower lock.

STERLING: So actually the boat was in the river for a while?

ORBESEN: Well, just a very short distance between these two locks.

STERLING: They crossed the river, in other words?

ORBESEN: Yes, they went across the river to the lower words.

STERLING: How did the mules pull across the river? Was there a bridge?

ORBESEN: There was a bridge, and we called it the boom bridge, and there was also a boom. Now that's constructed of heavy logs and timbers, and it lies right on the water. But the mules would go across the bridge, the boom bridge.

STERLING: Now, how long was that bridge?

ORBESEN: Oh, I would say about 30 feet long. I can't say exactly, but 30 or 40 feet long. It was quite a high bridge. I remember it well; but it was taken down or disintegrated somehow or other, and then only the boom was left.

STERLING: What was the purpose of the boom?

ORBESEN: Oh, that was for the man to cross on; if he didn't want to go up over that high bridge, you could go right across on that boom. It was made of logs and it was quite wide, 5 or 6 feet wide; and I've walked across it many times.

STERLING: Is that right?

ORBESEN: Yes. Now I well remember the mules and the horses pulling boats, and then there were also some steam-powered boats. And the steam-powered boat could handle one, two, or three barges and push one ahead of it, which was fastened and secured to it, and push one ahead, and might tow one or two behind. Now there was a rudder on each barge and a man to handle the rudder to keep the barge in it's proper course. Now my brothers had so much fun and I couldn't do this because back in those days -- I'll tell you why I couldn't. Girls in those days were never seen in pants or slacks. Today the girls can do everything cause they are sensibly dressed in slacks and pants; but, of course, we had to wear dresses. Now here's what they did: There was a bridge right beside us, a big high bridge, that went across the canal. And alongside of the floor of the bridge, iron rods went across; they were necessary in the construction of the bridge. I'm not enough engineer-minded to tell you just what these rods did, but I know they were there. And they would be about a few inches from the floor and about 2 inches in diameter -- an iron rod, which made a very good handhold. Now my brothers, when they could see a boat coming down with a cabin on it, they would get ahold of those, this stringer we called it, rod, and they would watch the boat to come and just at the proper time they would drop down on to the top of the cabin, which wasn't a very far hard drop to the top of the cabin. They had to time it just right or otherwise they'd fall farther onto the deck, and then they would scramble down to the deck and ride down to the locks about a mile away. And then they would walk back on the tow-path; and that was a delight. I thought wouldn't that be fine. Today I could have done that, but not then. (Laughter)

STERLING: Did you and your brothers get to know many of the captains?

ORBESEN: Well, my brothers did. Not I; I wouldn't have been allowed to ride on those boats anyhow because those crews were pretty rough men.

STERLING: Were there any fights or brawls or things like that among these river men? Do you recall?

ORBESEN: Not that I can recall myself, but there must have been. When they went to Channahon, sometimes they would have to lay over there quite a while if there were very many boats waiting to get locked through. It took quite a while to lock a boat through. And then they would go over to the saloons in Channahon, just a little town; but they had three saloons. One grocery store, maybe. Well, we did have two grocery stores, I mustn't forget them. They might have had their brawls and fights over there, but we were a mile away from the town. I can't tell you about them.

STERLING: Did they have bells or horns on their boats so that when they would go past you would wave and they would toot?

ORBESEN: Oh yes, yes, they had to have horns to signal to each other. There were lots of pleasure boats that went down too. A good many came from Joliet, in these small boats about twenty, thirty, forty feet long. And they would come from Joliet and go down as far as the lock and then -- but they didn't want to pay to get through the lock; they would lay up there for the day on Sunday. We got acquainted with some of those fellows. Some of them were real nice and interesting to talk to.

STERLING: What was the charge to get through the lock?

ORBESEN: I don't know. I think Mrs. Henker could tell you that. I don't know because we never had to get locked through. But my brother and I, one time in our canoe, got locked through along with another boat. They wouldn't lock just a canoe through, but if there was another boat in the lock. One day we got down there when there was a boat to be locked through, and that was real interesting because there is a lot of turbulence. The water is agitated quite a bit when you are going through, and my brother would hang on to the side of the lock and that was real fun.

STERLING: Who was the lock tender at the lower lock?

ORBESEN: Oh, there was just one lock tender and he had an assistant; Mr. Horton was the lock tender. He had someone to help him; name is Charlie Hicks. And he would be down when there was any boats to be locked through; then he would be down there at the lower lock.

STERLING: So the lock tender would have to actually lock a boat through the upper lock and then walk across that bridge?

ORBESEN: If he was needed, but one man could handle it. And so his assistant down at the lower lock could handle it there.

STERLING: Oh, I see.

ORBESEN: He didn't have to go down there. And the same coming upstream.

STERLING: I know Mr. Horton lived right there at the upper lock. Did someone live at the lower lock?

ORBESEN: No, but there was a little shack there; we called it "The Little

Shack." And his assistant lived in the shack; it could just accomodate him. It had a bunk in it and a stove, and he lived there.

STERLING: Did they lock them through at night as well as in the daytime?

ORBESEN: Not as a rule. I don't remember that particularly if they locked them through at night. I think they held up at night and traveled in the daytime.

STERLING: Do you ever remember any boats traveling on the canal at night?

ORBESEN: No, I can't say that I do remember any of them traveling at night. They didn't have the lighting equipment that we have today; it wouldn't have been very safe at night. Now, do you want to hear the most exciting thing that ever happened on the old canal?

STERLING: Oh yes.

ORBESEN: Well, this is it... It was about 1908 and this bridge that I told you about that went across--and, of course, we needed it because we had land on both sides. And we had buildings, and our cows were on the other side of the canal; and our pigs were over there. And our well was over there; we had an artesian well, and we carried our drinking water from over there. We had a big cistern at home that took care of all of our needs except for drinking and cooking, so we had to use that bridge. And we often drove to Minooka and we would go across it. And our neighbors used it, too. One of our neighbors was a mail carrier, Roy McCowan; and, of course, he needed to use it. He was driving horses

in those days, and he needed to get across that bridge to get to Minooka to where the post office was his headquarters. Now then this bridge was condemned by some of the wonderful executives around the country. I don't know who they were, but they condemned the bridge, and they closed it off. They put a barrier there so we couldn't drive across. We could still walk across so we could take care of our cows. My grandfather lived with us and he took care of all the stock. So we could walk across that bridge, but it was a great inconvenience to the neighbors. Besides this mail carrier, there was a farmer who lived not far from us; and he had some land over and across the canal alongside of the river. He had to get his machinery over there, so he had to use that bridge...Well, some of these fellows got together. It was never known for sure who they were, because if it had been, they would have been in prison or fined. But we knew that my grandfather was one of the ringleaders because he was a very smart man, and he knew how to do everything. And what do they do, some of these fellows at night -- there's a big stringer that goes across the top of an old wooden bridge. Perhaps you can visualize it; it's wooden and about 12 or 14 inches in depth. So what they did was to soak that big stringer in the middle of it with kerosene one night. Now when it burned through, that would let the bridge down into the water. So that was done at night, and in the morning my grandfather was keeping an eye on it, a pretty good eye. He had to get over there and milk the cows and bring the milk back, and we had to bring some water back. But he was watching it. He told us when it was time not to go across that bridge. And we were watching. Sure enough, when that stringer burnt through, down went this great, heavy bridge into the water. It made a great splash with waves going up and down the canal. And our cattle, who were

over on the other side, they came rushing up the bank as far as they could go to see what had happened. And my grandfather, who was a great humorist said, "They're looking for a place to get out!" (Laughter) Now there was a bridge, we thought now the state will build a bridge cause the state was supposed to keep up this water line, now they'll build us a bridge. No, they wouldn't do it. They absolutely refused to build a bridge. All right, what is the next thing to do? Well, these fellows were pretty smart. Now, I'll have to describe this to you so you can see it. Across the canal and a little ways up on the opposite side where we lived, that would be the west side of the canal, there was the "wide water," what we called the "wide water." The canal widened out there because it was very shallow, and the water could easily spill over into this "wide water." Now along there was a dike built to hold the water back, and our pasture was down below that dike. So what did these men do, but they go up there one night and they dig and dig and open that dike. That lets all the water out of the canal. My grandfather next morning called us and he says, "The water is all out of the canal this morning," with a twinkle in his eye which let us know that he was probably one of them. But we mustn't mention it; we kids were cautioned don't mention it if you think you know who did that (cause they would have been probably imprisoned or fined for doing that to state property). All right, the water was all out of the canal. It went flowing down through our pasture, and found it's way to the river which wasn't far away. They had this all figured out, and they knew what would happen. All right, now the water's out of the canal. We can walk down to the bottom of the canal and walk up on the other side. And the man who carried the mail could take his horse down through there, and he could

get up there too. And the man who had the farm over there could take his machinery down there. All right, that was very interesting. My sister and I were walking along down the bottom this morning, and here came reporters and men of all descriptions to find out what had happened and see if they could find out who did this. And a reporter questioned us. Of course, we were smart enough, we didn't know anything, we didn't tell him anything. Still no bridge. The state would not build a bridge. They were probably mad at all this that went on; and they wouldn't build a bridge. So what was done then, all the neighbors and the people that lived in the community contributed money and they got a subscription up, and then we built the bridge.

STERLING: Now where exactly was that bridge located?

ORBESEN: Right beside where we lived; now that's one mile north of Channahon.

STERLING: One mile north.

ORBESEN: It was on the road to Minooka, and many people needed to use that road.

STERLING: I've seen pictures; Mrs. Henker has a picture of a bridge that's toppled into the water with a car on it. That's the bridge across the river.

ORBESEN: That would be down at Channahon.

STERLING: By the boom there?

ORBESEN: Well.

STERLING: Would it have been that bridge?

ORBESEN: Could have been one of those other bridges. There were 2 or 3 bridges across down there in Channahon.

STERLING: Oh, I see.

ORBESEN: It could have been one of them. It probably was one of them. Did you interview her, too?

STERLING: Yes. You mentioned your grandfather. He lived with you?

ORBESEN: He lived with us; his wife had died many years before when she was a young woman. She left 6 children, and my mother was the oldest of them. So my grandfather lived with us, and he was a very important member of our family cause he took care of the cows. We had about 16, 17 head of cattle all the time, and he raised the pigs, and raised a great big garden. We had a big garden down on what we called the "state land." That was about a quarter of a mile south on the west side of the canal, and he could irrigate from the canal. My father arranged to pay; I think he paid about \$5 a year for the use of the water from the canal. And the garden was sown low, way down low; and my grandfather constructed a wooden trough that went through the bank of the canal. And he could shut that off or open it when he wanted to irrigate, as we always had plenty of vegetables. And we had a horse, and he would drive down there to plow for him. The horse going away from home, she's very slow, she would hardly go at all; but when she's headed back, she'd go like sixty. (Laughter)

STERLING: Was your grandfather a Civil War veteran?

ORBESEN: Yes, indeed he was. He'd been in 9 battles; he spent 3 years in the Civil War. He was only 16 when he enlisted, but he was tall and large and looked like he was 18. And he gave his age as 18, and he was in the Civil War. He told us many stories about his war experiences, but he came through unscathed. A bullet never touched him.

STERLING: Did he go as a volunteer?

ORBESEN: As a volunteer. Oh, yes. He went in from Iowa; his folks lived in Iowa at that time. He was in the 19th Iowa Infantry.

STERLING: Did he participate in any of the G.A.R. activities in Channahon?

ORBESEN: Oh, yes, of course he did. He was a very important member of the old soldiers. We called him "The Old Soldiers." I had a picture of them, but I can't find it. It was in our family, but I don't think I own it. I think my sister had it. But there is one in the canal office at Lockport, and Mrs. Henker has one of the old soldiers. It was taken on Memorial Day at the Town Hall. My grandfather could play the fife; he was real good on the fife, and he always instituted the music on Memorial Day. He would have a snare drummer and a bass drummer that he recruited from people who live nearest. And the fife, you could hear it from a mile away; and he played good marches both in the church where we had our services in the beginning and then up at the cemetery when the soldiers marched around to decorate the graves. And he is buried up there in that cemetery; all my folks are there.

STERLING: Do you remember a G.A.R. encampment in Joliet in 1911?

ORBESEN: Well, they had several encampments; and there would be, yes.

STERLING: There apparently was a big parade in Joliet in 1911. I have pictures of that parade.

ORBESEN: Yes, that's right. In 1911, I remember that. My mother attended that.

STERLING: Is that right. Did you come up to see the parade?

ORBESEN: No, I don't remember having been there for that. My grandfather used to be invited to come to different cities for Memorial parades at Freeport and Galesburg. He used to go over there because they wanted him to play the fife, add a little music. Sometimes he would go over there. He wouldn't be in Channahon; he'd be where they wanted him; it was quite an honor to be invited.

STERLING: Getting back to the canal for a minute. On the canal you say there was this wide -- what did you call it -- wide water?

ORBESEN: Wide water.

STERLING: In other parts of the canal it was wide enough for just 2 boats to pass? Was that about how wide it was?

ORBESEN: Yes, that's about the width of it. They had to be pretty careful passing each other so that they wouldn't hit each other, because it wasn't very wide. But they could pass. It would have to be wide enough for them to pass. Some boats would be going up and some down.

STERLING: They traveled on the right-hand side.

ORBESEN: Oh yes, always on the right-hand side.

STERLING: Well, what if boats wanted to pass? There was only one tow path, too, right? On one side of the canal?

ORBESEN: Yes, one tow path, on one side.

STERLING: What was the rule as far as how they passed? Who had to slacken their lines and --

ORBESEN: Oh, I wish my brother was here, because he could tell you every little detail like that. I don't know just exactly how they did that. Perhaps they passed the lines to each other. That might have been the way they did it. I'm not up on that.

STERLING: Did they have a barn where they kept the mules and horses?

ORBESEN: Oh, yes. Yes, in every town. Oh, about 10-12 miles apart there would be a barn where they could house the animals, perhaps overnight, and when they got rested enough to go again.

STERLING: You live along the canal, did you ever sell food or things to a boat going past?

ORBESEN: Oh, no we didn't, because we didn't have to do that. You see, my father had a good salary; he was a deputy county clerk. And my grandfather raised the garden and the pigs, and cattle; and we had all of our own food. We didn't need to do that.

STERLING: Did other people do it along the canal?

ORBESEN: Not any that I know of. Not any that were in our vicinity. There could have been, but they would be somebody in a town; it wouldn't be along the canal. Yes, it probably would be in a town. I don't

remember that; but we didn't have to do that, no.

STERLING: Do you remember about the time the canal started to go downhill as the traffic declined?

ORBESEN: Well, let me think now . . . I wouldn't want to give a definite date on that; but when the deep waterway was dug and put through, then there was no more travel on the canal. And that would be what? . . . Well, you could get that all from the canal office in Lockport, just when that was finished. The deep waterway, that was the DesPlaines River; and that's the one that's used now, the one that goes down the Illinois River -- it was a good many years ago since there was travel on the canal . . . many years. See, I have been away from there for quite a number of years, lived in other places. But I was born there in this house beside the canal, and I lived there till I was married. And for 3 years after I was married, my husband and I fixed up the old house on the other side of the canal; and we farmed that land for my mother. My father was gone by this time. I lived there, oh, the first part of my life.

STERLING: Is the house still there?

ORBESEN: No, neither house is still there. Our house got to be pretty old, and my mother moved away. She moved to Glen Ellen to live with my oldest brother who came back from the Navy, and she had that old house taken down because it was in poor condition. It was over a hundred years old, and she had it removed. And then the house on the other side of the canal where my daughter was born was taken down just a few years ago. That land has all been sold; my mother sold all of the land that we had owned.

STERLING: How did your father get back and forth to work?

ORBESEN: We had to drive either to Birch Bridge or to Minooka, and he would take a train on the Rock Island Railroad. It was up to us kids when we were big enough to drive a horse -- my brother would take him in the morning, and I would go and get him at night. I wouldn't go in the morning because I was afraid I would be late for school; I was one of these who were very particular about being to school on time and never missing a day. So I would go and get him at night. Now in the winter time it would be too much to go every night and morning in the severe winters we had, so my father rented a room in Joliet. He stayed up there through the week and then he would come home on Saturday and go back Monday morning.

STERLING: In the summers when you weren't in school, did you ever go up with him and spend the day in Joliet?

ORBESEN: Yes, occasionally we did. I remember my sister and I would once in a while spend a day with him. One time he took me to a circus. He always saw to it that we kids saw a circus at least one. There were three circuses came every summer, different circuses, and he always saw to it that we got to go. Sometimes he'd take us himself. Of course he would like to see the circus too! (Laughter) Yes, I remember that well.

STERLING: Where did they have the circuses?

ORBESEN: There was a fairgrounds out somewhere, I don't know just where it was; and then there was a big parade and we had a very fine spot to watch the parade from in the court house where my Father worked. That's that's the old court house that was just taken down not too long ago, and

the new court house built. He was on the second floor with the windows that faced Jefferson Street, and the parade went along there. We always got to see the parade in the morning and the circus in the afternoon.

STERLING: What would the parades be like? Can you remember them?

ORBESEN: Yes, elephants drawing the cages; lions, tigers, animals of all discription in the cages; and girls all dressed in beautiful costumes perhaps riding the elephants or horses. It was quite a sight. It's the same as they have today. It was quite similar to the parades of today.

STERLING: You mentioned the postmaster. What was his name?

ORBESEN: The postmaster down in Channahon was Mr. Hulbert, Clint Hulbert.

STERLING: Who was the postman that went out and did the rural deliveries?

ORBESEN: Oh, he was called the mail carrier, and that was Roy McCowen. He was the one that kept his horses up at his brother's that I told you about a little while ago.

STERLING: Now I saw a picture; I think Mrs. Henker has it, of the mail carrier's little carriage. It wasn't very clear in the picture. Could you describe that for me?

ORBESEN: It was sort of a box-like arrangement. It could be pulled by one horse, and there was room in it for all the mail that he would

be expected to carry. It was white, painted white -- It said on it, "U.S. Mail", and it was just a regular box-like arrangement, painted white. Then of course, when automobiles began to be in use, why he sold those things or got rid of them; and he drove an automobile then, a small car.

STERLING: Then it was just a little box on wheels?

ORBESEN: That's about what it was, although it was pretty well constructed. It was a regular vehicle and not flimsey at all. Very well made.

STERLING: Were they common, or did just mailmen have those?

ORBESEN: Only mailmen. Especially made for the mailmen. It took him all day to carry the mail. When he came home at night, the old horse would be ready to rest. Then he'd take a different horse the next day; he always kept two horses.

STERLING: What was Channahon like?

ORBESEN: Channahon was a place of good solid humor; and my family, all of us, were humorous of the first degree. We knew how to enjoy the characters. In a little town like that there would always be a good many characters of distinction. Not that they were well educated, but each one had his foibles; and we had sense enough to profit by them. Of course, they never knew how we laughed; but we did. Now there was Mr. Hutchins. Mr Hutchins drove the stagecoach. He had quite a good-sized wagon that a horse could pull. He drove three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday to Minooka. And he would bring goods for the grocery stores; and if anybody wanted to go to Joliet, they would ride with him and take the train from Minooka. Now this was a great inconvenience to him when that bridge was out. He

had to drive up, oh, three or four miles north to what was Bird's Bridge. That was the next bridge from us. It was at least four miles away, perhaps five; and he would have to drive up to that bridge and go across and go to Minooka. Mr. Hutchins was quite a character; and when he was a young man, a horse had stepped on his face and cut out his tongue. "Now if you talk like this, can you understand what I say? And we couldn't communicate with him. That's the way he talked. He only went to Minooka on his day which was Monday, Wednesday, and ..." (Laughter) Did you understand that, Mr. Sterling? We had a lot of characters that were very funny. We kids made up a song. We always had a lot of humor. We made up a song about "Next Come In." Some of you might not know this poem, this old song of long ago about "Where, oh where shall the wedding supper be? Way down south in a hollow tree. First come in was a bumble bee, totin' his fiddle upon his knee. Next come in was a big black snake, crawled all over the cranberry cake." That's a very well-known, old song of long ago. We took that for our base, and then we made up songs about all the people around Channahon. My mother made up the best one of all. I won't tell you all of them, but we had pretty near everybody around there in this song. Now this was a character; his name was Tim. I'm not going to tell you his last name because he's got relatives that still live around there; and if they happen to hear this, they'll get kinda mad at me for recalling it. But his first name was Tim. He was a kind of a disreputable -- well, he wasn't disreputable; he was honest enough -- but he smelled of Japanese oil all the time, and looked awful poor-like. So my mother's song was this: Next come in was poor old Tim; the moss had grown all over him. Um hm. (Laughter) So we had some different ones that lived around there, and our song. So we had lots of fun. We laughed continuously. At one thime there were eleven people living in our house-

hold. We had these two houses. There was my father and my mother and we five children, my grandfather and two aunts and an uncle. That was quite a household. Everyone contributed to the welfare of the household and humor of it, too.

STERLING: In Channahon itself how many stores were there and that type of thing?

ORBESEN: We had two stores. Mr. Randall had one store. Mr. Randall was a great character. I could tell you something very humorous about him. He had a general store with groceries on one side and dry goods on the other, and always a big cheese in the big round glass case on one side. We thought a lot of Mr. Randall. He was an old soldier, too, a veteran of the Civil War. He and my grandfather were the best of friends. We were often in his store. The other store was Mr. Hulbert's who also had the Post Office. He had the general store too, and the Post Office right there in the store. Clint Hulbert. There were perhaps about three or four hundred people living in the town. That would be the population of it in those days. It's grown a great deal now. There's a lot more people there now. Of course, everybody knew everybody else, knew all about them. We had some that lived by their wits. Nobody seemed to work much. Some of the more enterprising ones would work for the farmers. Some of them would live by fishing and hunting and nefarious schemes like robbing somebody's chicken house. (Laughter) Here's something I can tell you that was funny. There was one there, and his first name was Jack. I won't give you his last name either, although I could. He lived alone; his wife had died. He lived in a little house, shack-like; and he was cooking his chicken. And his neighbor from across the road came over and smelled this chicken cooking; and

he said, "Jack, I want you to quit stealing my chickens." Jack said, "This ain't your chicken, it's Mr. Holbrook's!" (Laughter) He was surprised into confusion. So you see the humor we had and the fun we had. There was so much to laugh at.

STERLING: Did the Randall Store and the Hulbert Store carry about the same line?

ORBESEN: Yes, perhaps the same.

STERLING: Where did you do your shopping? At Mr. Randall's?

ORBESEN: Mr. Randall's as a rule because he was an old Civil War veteran and great friend of our family. And then we traded some in Minooka; and when my mother needed to buy clothes and shoes for us, she would go to Joliet. My grandfather got a pension as all the old soldiers did. This pension came every three months. Then he and my mother and one of the children would go to Joliet, and he would buy up his supplies -- what he needed for clothes -- and my mother would trade in Joliet. And then they'd come home with a lot of good things that we couldn't get in Channahon, like fresh oranges, bananas, and some kinds of candy that we couldn't get otherwise. It was always a great thing when they went. We called it, "Going with the pension." Now my youngest sister was always allowed to go. She was the great pet of my grandfather, and she would always be allowed to go, and I never got to go very often. But one time I begged if he wouldn't please take me. And I thought maybe I could go, and maybe she wouldn't. But lo and behold, when it came time to go, she was taken along too! (Laughter) And that was called, "Going with the pension."

STERLING: What was the check? Do you recall how much it was?

ORBESEN: No, I don't remember. It was added for what his needs were. He only had to buy his clothes and his tobacco. He bought his tobacco down at Mr. Randall's store. He smoked a pipe, but my father didn't smoke. My mother and my sister had asthma; and they couldn't stand smoke, so there was never any smoke in our house. My grandfather smoked outside. No, I don't know how much the pension was. I knew at one time, but I can't remember that.

STERLING: What else was in Channahon besides these two general stores?

ORBESEN: Oh, three saloons.

STERLING: Three saloons.

ORBESEN: Don't forget them! They were quite popular Not among our family; we didn't patronize the saloons.

STERLING: Now, earlier you said that some boats would have to lay over in Channahon. How did they do that? Just tie up along the canal?

ORBESEN: Tie up alongside the bank. There was a long stretch there that they had to tie up there when they were waiting to get locked through.

STERLING: Were they tied up at wide waters or

ORBESEN: No. Down at the lock.

STERLING: Well, that would kind of jam things up down there, wouldn't it?

ORBESEN: Well, they had plenty of space. Goodness gracious! There's a mile or so they could tie up along there. There's plenty of space for them to tie up.

STERLING: Did the canal freeze in the winter?

ORBESEN: Oh, yes, indeed it did! And then we could skate on it. I remember one time conditions were just right. The canal was frozen smooth as glass. And my uncle who was living with us at the time, he brought out a kitchen chair, a wooden kitchen chair; and he had me sit on it and hang on to the sides of it. And he had his skates on, and he skated behind me and pushed me up as far as the wide water. Just went like the wind.

STERLING: Is that right.

ORBESEN: Oh, was that fun! I'll never forget that. And we spent lots of time on that old canal, in it and on it.

STERLING: Did any boats ever get caught in ice flows or ice jams on the canal that you can recall?

ORBESEN: Oh, no, no; they would all stop navigation as soon as it began to freeze -- Navigation stopped entirely through the winter.

STERLING: Now, if they laid over at Channahon, then was there an inn in Channahon? Or a hotel?

ORBESEN: No, they couldn't stay there through the winter. They always managed to get perhaps to Peoria, Lockport, or Joliet, or someplace where there would be accommodations for them to stay. Maybe their homes were in some of those places, and they'd go home for the winter.

STERLING: But if it was like overnight, or for a couple of days, was there a hotel in Channahon?

ORBESEN: No, I can't remember that there was. They might have been able

to get a room in somebody's house, I don't know. We didn't accommodate anybody in our house. That I don't know for sure if they stayed there or not. You see, we were a whole mile north of Channahon. Some of those things that went on down in the village we wouldn't be aware of.

STERLING: Did you know Mr. Horton? Quite well?

ORBESEN: Oh, yes, I knew him as well as you could know anybody.

STERLING: What was he like? Describe him.

ORBESEN: What was he like? Mr. Horton? Well, he was a small man; he wasn't very big. He was small, and he was a very good conversationalist. And they had the first Graphophone. They never came to our community, and we kids loved the music. I've always been able to play from the time I was a little girl. I played organ, and we loved music. So we used to go down to Mr. Horton's quite often. We'd often be there and go into the house where Mrs. Horton would play her music on the Graphophone. And Mr. Horton would tell us something about his life and reminisce, very interestingly. He was a very fine gentleman. We liked him very much and his wife was a very dignified person, too -- handsome -- she was Ruth Henker's grandmother. We spent lots of time at the locks. It was great.

STERLING: How did he lock boats through? What did they call the big beam?

ORBESEN: They would lock them through by hand. A boat is coming down the canal; down, that means going down towards Channahon, alright. The lock itself is now full of water. Then he opens this gate; he can push that big bar, the big timber; he can push that...I guess he might have had somebody help him, but it could be pushed. Now then, let me tell you exactly how it was. The lock itself is now full of water; and when he

opens that beam, this boat can come right in on the same surface, the same top, as it had been on. Now then, he closes that beam and the one below; the lock must have two of these and be long enough to accommodate a boat. One boat at a time, in those locks, because they were small locks. Now then, he opens the gate; he opens the valve of the lower gate, and he leaves the upper gate closed. Now when he opens that valve, the water will gradually go down; and the boats sink down with it. Now when it gets down to the level of the next water, that would be this river that crossed it -- when it gets down there -- then he can open that gate; and the boat can go on down there. And then the same goes on at the second lock. Now when a boat comes up, it is just the reverse. It comes up from below and comes to the lower lock first. Now it enters that lock on the same level and gets into that lock. Alright, now then they close that lower valve. They close that, and they open the other one. That lets water in, and lets the boat rise up to the surface. And when it gets up to the surface where the river is, it can come on to the next lock. Same process.

STERLING: What were these valves like?

ORBESEN: Oh goodness, I wish I had more mechanical knowledge so I could describe it to you what the valve was like. I can't.

STERLING: Were they wooden valves?

ORBESEN: I think they were metal, but I am not sure. If I had known you were going to ask me these kind of questions, I would have written to my brother and had him write me a whole thesis on it, because he knows everything about it. He spent an awful lot of time there, and he was mechanically -minded, too.

STERLING: Where does he live?

ORBESEN: He lives up near Sister Bay, Wisconsin.

STERLING: Does he ever come down to visit you?

ORBESEN: No. He can't travel; I go up to visit him. He is not able to travel. You know where Sister Bay is on the peninsula that sticks up there in Wisconsin -- Door County -- between Green Bay and Lake Michigan. And that is where he lives.

STERLING: My brother lives in Wisconsin. I wonder if I get a chance to go up there next summer, do you think if I would drive over to your brother's house that he would do an interview?

ORBESEN: He would be happy to, and he's the greatest talker in this world.

STERLING: I'll take five hours of tape and my recorder and go see him.

ORBESEN: He could tell you so much, and he was a sailor. He went aboard a tramp steamer. He's been around Cape Horn and went up into the Pacific Ocean, and I was just reading one of his articles that he had sent to the Chicago Tribune about what some of his experiences on that trip. He'll talk.

STERLING: Is he older or younger than you?

ORBESEN: He's about twenty months younger, but he looks about ten years older. (Laughter) That's what they tell me; and he talks, and he remembers everything. He has a wonderful memory of everything.

STERLING: If I go up there this summer, I'll give you a call and maybe you can give me his address, or tell me how to get to his home.

ORBESEN: He'd be pretty hard to find.

STERLING: Would he?

ORBESEN: He left Sister Bay, where he was living. In Sister Bay we could find him there because that was easy, but he left Sister Bay after his wife died. And now he lives off in the woods, and it's almost impossible to find him. And he couldn't find it himself the last time we were up there -- the place where he wanted to go and visit. He's a food faddist, and he eats only organic-raised food, and so he's got to live in a place where they sell this. I've been up there to their house, but I wouldn't be able to tell you how to get there. The only thing you could do would be to write. I would write to him and have him meet you in Sister Bay or else in Bay if you want to do that -- if he consents to do it.

STERLING: Yes, that would be interesting.

ORBESEN: Yes, oh, you would like him! He has a great deal of humor, and he can keep you laughing, and he can give you all the exact knowledge that you have been asking me. He knows all of that. But I do know how the boats were locked through, and that's the way.

STERLING: Now, in getting back to the Channahon itself, how many churches were in Channahon?

ORBESEN: Just one at that time -- the Methodist Church. And, of course, we went to that. The Catholic people had to go to Minooka. There was a Catholic Church in Minooka. But I was sent to Sunday School from the time I was a little girl. And then I was able to play; I could always play music. It just seemed to come natural to me, and I was elected organist when I was just a young child. I played in Sunday School and this church, the

Methodist Church, when I was ten years old. And I played in church when I was eleven years old. I played there until I left the town.

STERLING: That's really something.

ORBESEN: We had just ministers who would come out from Chicago. We didn't have money enough to pay a minister to live there, but we had student ministers who would come out. And in those days the Methodist (well, almost anybody who was of a religious mind) thought it was awfully wrong to do anything on Sundays that didn't have religious connotation. So this young minister would have to come out on Saturday night and stay somewhere -- with somebody who would keep him. We often kept him, and then he didn't go back until Monday morning 'cause it was against their religious laws to travel on Sunday. And cards, "the good old deck", as we called them, that was the invention of the devil himself. And you were not supposed to play cards; but, of course, we kids played cards. We were not that religious, and we would play cards with "the good old deck". And they would allow us to play Flinch; and they would allow us to play Pit, which was based right, actually based upon the imaginations of the Board of Trade in Chicago -- which was absolutely gambling. But they couldn't see the difference. They were just taught that you shouldn't play with "the good old deck", but we did anyway. We used to play Poker. My father taught us how to play cards, and he provided us with Poker chips and taught us how to play. But not one of us turned out to be a gambler, so it didn't hurt us any.

STERLING: Were there any temperance unions or things of that sort?

ORBESEN: Oh, yes, I should say so. My mother and I both belonged to a WCTU, the temperance organization. Yes, and my grandfather campaigned quite vociferously against liquor. He had, and as times passed, he had taken his

share of it. Now and then he would go on a "tear", we'd say. But he had quit that, and now he was campaigning for the temperance and to get the saloons out of Channahon. And he wrote a poem; we can all write poetry. I write some myself; it's always funny. So he wrote a poem about the village board of Channahon. Now the village board of Channahon was in favor of keeping the saloons. The campaign was to get the town voted dry. Each town could vote whether it wanted to be dry or wet. The town itself could vote. So, the village board, of course, they wanted to keep the saloons because they got some revenue from them and paid for the policemen. We had one policeman. And paid for the lights and paid for the gravels of the roads. So my grandfather's poem -- if I can remember a little of it -- was very funny and was published in the Joliet paper. And that he was razzing this village board of Channahon, and here's the way it went:

'What do you do for a light at night?
 And how will you gravel the road?
 No police protection, what a sad flight!
 You'll hardly dare leave your abode,'
 Said the village board of Channahon.

STERLING: (Laughter) Were the people on the board the saloon owners or were they just interested in the revenue?

ORBESEN: Interested mostly in the revenue. And I suppose they imbibed a little too, themselves. Most likely they wanted, they had a real personal motive for wanting to keep the saloons there. No doubt.

STERLING: Who owned the saloons?

ORBESEN: Oh, I don't want to give you their names because they still got relatives that live around here, and I know their names real well. There were three saloons ... They did pretty well.

STERLING: Were there any black people that lived down that way?

ORBESEN: No. No, no, we didn't know any black people at all. Never had them in those days. If you saw one, it was quite something to just even see a colored person. We didn't have any that I remember of.

STERLING: Was your grandfather active in politics? Or your father?

ORBESEN: Oh, my father, yes, because his job was a political job. See, the County Clerk, that's a political job and voted on every four years. There was an election, and my father had to help campaign for that. And he used to bring home some money that he was supposed to use; and sometimes he'd have quite a wad of bills there, too. But my father was one of the most honest men in this world. He was -- he would equal Abraham Lincoln in his honesty -- so he never removed anything from that roll of bills. And he taught us kids to be honest. He wouldn't even let us play "Robbing Casino". Do you know the game of "Casino"? Where you have a pack in front of you and if your card matches the other guy's pack -- if you play "Robbing Casino", you can take his pack. He caught us playing that one time, and he stopped us playing "Robbing Casino". We could play just plain "Casino", where you kept your own, but no, no robbing. He said if you want to rob somebody, go out and rob somebody's hen roost. And that gives you an idea of his character and what he instilled in us.

STERLING: Now, did he have to run for election himself?

ORBESEN: No; he never wanted to try for the job, although he might have been able to have been elected because he knew everything. He was there for 24 years. He was there when he died. And he was the one, he was the brains of the office. But he didn't want to try for it; he didn't think he could

get elected. He was not what you would call a "hail-fellow-well-met"; he was not that type. But he could have his job, whoever was elected; and there was always Republicans in those days. The Democrats had no show at all, probably never even tried to get it; but he would always be appointed. I remember him coming home after one election and saying to my mother, "Well, well, Mother, we're safe for another four years"; and so he would always be appointed.

STERLING: Who would appoint him?

ORBESEN: The County Clerk himself.

STERLING: The clerk himself.

ORBESEN: He had the prerogative of appointing his helpers.

STERLING: Who were some of the clerks that your father worked for?

ORBESEN: The last one was Al Mottinger, and my daughter's name is Mottinger. And her husband is a distant relative of that Al Mottinger, and he was the one that I remember best. He was in the office when my father died. My father died when he was only 48 years old. He died very suddenly. He had blood-poisoning. And, of course, he was missed greatly 'cause the office then was in turmoil without his brains to direct it. And he died in just a very short time, about a week, I guess. And I remember this Al Mottinger; they all came down to the funeral. Al Mottinger shed tears at my father's funeral; he felt so bad to lose him.

STERLING: Did he ever talk about politics in Joliet? Were there ever any real good contests or any scandals in Joliet back then?

ORBESEN: Oh, I can't tell you about those; I don't know. I never took much interest in them. We were so far away from it.

STERLING: Yes, yes.

ORBESEN: My father would have known about them. But, no, you see the whole county in those days was Republican; and the Democrats didn't dare to show their faces hardly. They were in the minority, and I don't think there was much of any turmoil of that nature in the days when I was growing up.

STERLING: What about at the national level, for president and congress, and so forth?

ORBESEN: Yes, well, I can name you all the presidents from Washington on down.

STERLING: What was your family's attitude toward Teddy Roosevelt, for example?

ORBESEN: Oh, in favor of him, of course! We admired Teddy Roosevelt greatly.

STERLING: Now, he visited Joliet in 1900. You probably -- that's too long ago for you.

ORBESEN: Yes, I was only six years old in 1900. I wouldn't have remembered that.

STERLING: Would your father have told you about that?

ORBESEN: Yes, he could have. He probably did, too. He died in 1910. So, oh yes, he was an admirer of Teddy Roosevelt and thought a great deal of him. And Willy McKinley -- and my brother's named for Willy McKinley.

He was President, you know, just ahead of Roosevelt. McKinley was assassinated in about what? 1901; and then Teddy Roosevelt as Vice-President. And my brother's named William after the President, William McKinley. But they were just about all Republicans in those days; the presidents, too. ...Cleveland was in office when I was born, but I can't remember him. He was a Democrat. Grover Cleveland was a Democrat. It's my hobby to remember, and I can say the presidents. I learned them when I was a little girl. My father had a picture of them up on the wall in our kitchen of as far as the time when I could learn, and I memorized the presidents. I still keep that up today; my hobby is to memorize.

STERLING: What about Taft?

ORBESEN: Taft? Well, Taft, he was a so-so as a president. He was alright. He wasn't anything that went on scandalist in his administration. It was the Harding administration that had the scandal. The oil scandal, the Teapot Dome, and that was Harding; but my father was gone by that time. You see Harding was elected about 1920, I think. We were living in Saskatchewan, Canada, at that time. My husband and I, we spent three years farming in Saskatchewan, Canada. We worked a whole section of land up there, six hundred and forty acres. I didn't know too much about that Teapot Dome, but I read and heard about it a good deal since. And that was a scandal! And then Coolidge came in next; when Harding died, Coolidge was Vice-President.

STERLING: How did they report the death of Harding?

ORBESEN: What's that?

STERLING: How did they report the death of Harding? How did he die?

ORBESEN: Well, we never knew. I don't think we know exactly what he died from. There were all kinds of tales, rumors, and conjectures. It never was brought out to the public to know exactly what caused his death.... Well, we got away from the canal and into politics, didn't we?

STERLING: Yes, we ought to get back to the canal for a few minutes.

ORBESEN: Don't you think you have all that you want from me? (Laughter)

STERLING: Are there any other things that you can remember about the canal that you haven't for posterity?

ORBESEN: If you get up to talk to my brother, he'll tell you about how one time down in Morris the driver catapulted a whole team of mules and their driver into the canal? Now that is a tale! I am not quite familiar enough with the details of how it was done, but my brother can tell you that. My uncle (uncle by marriage) lived there at the time, and he knew all about this. And that was something, too; that was really something. But I am not well versed enough on just how it was done. But anyhow, this one driver, he was mad at the other driver because this other driver was a mean driver, and he starved his mules. They were awful poor and skinny, and he beat them and swore at them. This other driver had a notion that he was gonna put a stop to that. So by manipulating the ropes he knew how to do it, that he could send that whole equipage of the mules and the man into the canal. And right away he went to the house where my uncle was a boy at the time. He said to my uncle's father, "Go take care of my team; I am getting out of here. I just drowned 'so-and-so' in the canal." And this man that did it, he went West; and nobody ever heard of him again.

STERLING: Is that right?

ORBESEN: That is a little bit of the detail of it. My brother could tell you exactly how it was done. That was a real happening.

STERLING: What were some of the sounds on the canal when a boat would go past? What would you hear if you were watching?

ORBESEN: Joliet first, and then Lockport. There were locks at Lockport. Then Channahon was the next town. The next town was Morris, and then Marseilles, Ottawa, Peru, LaSalle, and Peoria. The canal was dug from Peoria to Chicago, and there it entered the Illinois River.

STERLING: When a boat would pass your home, what were some of the things you would hear? What were some of the sounds.....of the driver driving the mules, or?

ORBESEN: Yes, perhaps. He might holler at his mules or swear at them. He had to have a good swearing vocabulary -- at the mules -- and occasionally we would hear that. But you wouldn't hear anything from the boats themselves, except if it was a steamboat, you would hear the engine going. If it was powered by steam, you would hear that. But no, not anything very remarkable.

STERLING: Now, Mrs. Henker says that the first telephone in the area came to her grandfather's house?

ORBESEN: That's right.

STERLING: Do you recall when that was installed?

ORBESEN: Down at the lock. It was the first telephone. It was there when I can begin to remember, because if we needed a doctor, my grandfather would have to go down to the lock to call the doctor who lived in Minooka.

When we needed him, that is the way we got a doctor. And that was the first telephone.

STERLING: When these steamboats used to pull and push maybe up to three barges, did they have to lock these through one at a time?

ORBESEN: Yes, at our lock, one at a time, because it wasn't big enough to accommodate more than just one boat at a time. So, if there were very many boats waiting to get through, it took quite a while to get them all through because it was a slow process. But it is the same process that's in use today at the Brandon Lock here in Joliet, the very same way it is done wherever you go; and I have been locked through several of them. And then there is a lock in Chicago, and it goes into the lake. We went through that with our own boat. My husband and I were boating people, and we had yachts on Lake Michigan. We had two different forty-foot yachts on Lake Michigan. So, we've been through the lock up there with our own boat.

STERLING: One final question. Mrs. Henker said that in the summer there would be launches tied up down in Channahon. Can you describe some of these launches and were they houseboats with small launches?

ORBESEN: Not very many were houseboats. It was just pleasure boats, just a launch and they only used them to come down maybe on Sunday or a holiday from Joliet to Channahon.

STERLING: They would tie up in Channahon?

ORBESEN: Yes, most likely. Once we had some friends that tied up at our place. We used to get a ride once in a while on their boat, but not very

often, not as often as we wanted. They were powered by gasoline. Just, they had a top across the top and then a deck.

STERLING: Did Channahon have a reputation for being the pleasure area or the park area?

ORBESEN: No, not in that time, because we didn't have a park there. Channahon had a pretty bad reputation on the whole because, well, people there (a lot of them) didn't work at all. And some of them drank, and some of them stole chickens, and then there were dances. Of course, we girls were never allowed to go to the dances. They weren't fit for anybody very decent to go to. So it had a bad name in those days. I think it has probably recovered now and is thought a great deal more of. And in those days, if you came from Channahon, you weren't thought very highly of. (Laughter) But, like that mister, the man that says, "This ain't your chicken; it is Mrs. Holbrook's." (Laughter) We had a lot of that type, and they lived by fishing and hunting and other schemes. And then with the three saloons, that didn't add anything to the graciousness of it. But the people of the countryside, the farmers, they were highly respected. We had some fine people that lived outside. And, of course, my family -- I must say, we belonged to the elite. (Laughter)

STERLING: Well, thank you very much.

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PEOPLE

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SKUNK TRAPPERS' DELIGHT

Sister Bay, Wis., July 25—
On a beautiful summer evening years ago I strolled along the towpath of the Illinois and Michigan canal, enjoying an after-supper pipeful of a rather expensive brand of cut plug. [I only used this de luxe mixture in private, a practice of which the public was unaware.]

Suddenly, with loud rattling and clanking, two teams of mules hitched to farm implement machinery came around the corner on the dead run. This was so unusual a sight that I knocked out my pipe and



ran to the foot of the bridge hill, hoping there had been no serious accident.

The mule skimmers pulled their teams to a halt and in one voice hailed me with the smoker's signal of distress. They had run out of tobacco about 2 o'clock in the afternoon and, altho they were only a short mile from home and relief, it was very evident that they had reached the limit of human endurance.

Reaching into my hip pocket I produced a rubber pouch well filled with Morning Star, a brand of tobacco sold only in nearby Channahon. It had been subjected to a patented process supposed to remove all nicotine, but this left the tobacco as dry as old hay and it burned about as fast, making a very hot smoke.

It also had a vile odor, but the skunk trappers of the village (who, on account of their occupation, were immune to odor) did not mind, and Morning Star was their favorite brand. They were the only people in the world, tho, who would or could smoke it.

The manufacturer had gone out of business and his entire stock had been sold at a loss to a Chicago wholesaler, who supplied it to the two stores in Channahon, where it was sold at 5 cents for 5 ounces.

Flinging up their corn cobs with my Morning Star, the two skimmers drove off, cursing the vile quality of the donation. It was several years before they learned the facts of the case and even then they still got angry over the trick I had played on them.

WILLIAM KNOWLTON

CHICKEN DINNER ON THE OLD CANAL 1965

Sister Bay, Wis., Jan. 3 —
On a beautiful summer day shortly after the turn of the century I was playing in the yard, which was bounded on the west by the towpath of the Illinois and Michigan canal. One of our numerous Plymouth Rock hens was drinking at the water's edge. While the hen was thus engaged the head of a mule emerged beyond the abutment of the canal bridge, followed by the rest of the mule, and then by four more mules straining in their collars.

Astride the last mule the lordly driver lolled in his saddle. His gaze rested on the hen and he instantly became alert. The long tow line, stretched taut, was about two feet off the ground for a few yards behind the team, but before it angled out over the water it sagged down until it was only inches above the grass.

The driver gave a few short tugs on the single rein, or jerk line, which led to the left hand bit ring of the lead mule, and that well-trained animal turned to the right away from the water's edge. A soothing hand slowed the team down and the tow line began snaking along in the short grass of the towpath behind the unsuspecting hen.

Nearer it came until it was only inches behind her. She dipped her bill for what was to be her last drink, and now the line was under her tail feathers. The driver's long black snake whip cracked, the mules lurched ahead, the line snapped taut, and the hapless fowl, squawking indignantly, was catapulted into the canal 15 feet from the bank.

A hen can keep afloat for two or three minutes, but she cannot make much headway in the water, and when her feathers are soaked she will sink. But before the hen sank, and while she was still floundering toward the shore the barge came along.

The steersman laid his course to pass the castaway close aboard. The deckhand, grinning like a Cheshire cat, had equipped himself with a dip net with a strong wooden handle about eight feet long. This net was an essential item in the rigging of a canal boat. It was plunged into the water just astern of the struggling fowl, and she was immediately taken on board and down into the cabin.

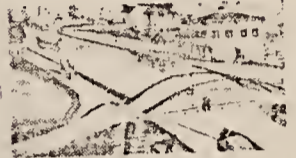
I ran up on the bridge from where I could keep the barge in sight for some distance. Soon wood smoke began curling up from the tin chimney or smokestack of the cabin. A few hours later I noticed some Plymouth Rock chicken feathers floating down the Illinois and Michigan canal.

WILLIAM KNOWLTON

ON THE OLD TOWPATH

Sister Bay, Wis., Nov. 29 —
The Parrish cartoon "The Volga Boatmen Troika" in yesterday's TRIBUNE was excellent politically, but it contained a technical error that cannot go unmarked by one who was raised within a stone's throw of the old Illinois and Michigan canal, as this writer was.

The cartoon shows the towline made fast to the bow of



anal scene, about 1876. Notice the position of the towline.

the barge. The line never was secured at this point, since it would have been impossible to keep the barge clear of the bank in that case.

The towline was always belayed on an iron cleat, about 15 feet aft of the bow on the barge's gunwale. With the line fast at this point, the barge had a tendency to sheer out, away from the towpath, instead of turning in toward it.

To correct this, the steersman stood with his back against the tiller, facing the towpath and bracing his feet on wooden cleats which were spiked to the deck. It was all so nicely calculated that a very little pressure on the "weather helm" sufficed to keep the barge on course.

The long towline led forward at an oblique angle until it reached the towpath where the end was made fast to the center of a strong wooden bar, or singletree, to which the chain traces of the harness were hooked, one at each end of the bar.

There were five mules in a team, and the driver rode the rear mule, guiding his team with a single rein, or jerk line, which led to the lefthand bit ring of the lead mule's bridle. A steady pull turned the team to the left — a few sharp jerks turned it to the right, the lead mule being trained to do this.

The rest of the driver's equipment consisted of a very extensive and fluent vocabulary and a long blacksnake whip. As a general rule, the whip was used as a noisemaker only. It was very seldom that a mule was actually struck.

When two boats met, the up-bound boat turned to the left, away from the towpath, and its team turned to the right, away from the water's edge and stopped. The towline then lay at a long angle across the towpath until it reached the water where it sank down in a large bight.

The downstream boat kept her course and speed. When the mules came alongside of the towline that lay on the ground, they hopped nimbly over it and went on, the barge passing over the sunken bight. The maneuver was so well timed that the upstream boat did not lose steerage way, being kept under control all the time.

The reason the mules hopped over the towline instead of stepping over it was because they knew that if the other team started up too soon they would be caught by the line and thrown into the canal; so they got on the safe side of the rope as soon as possible.

WILLIAM KNOWLTON

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